Duke University Press

Chapter Title: The Force of Things

Book Title: Vibrant Matter
Book Subtitle: A Political Ecology of Things
Book Author(s): JANE BENNETT
Published by: Duke University Press. (2010)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv111jh6w.5

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The Force of Things

In the wake of Michel Foucault's death in 1984, there was an explosion of scholarship on the body and its social construction, on the operations of biopower. These genealogical (in the Nietzschean sense) studies exposed the various micropolitical and macropolitical techniques through which the human body was disciplined, normalized, sped up and slowed down, gendered, sexed, nationalized, globalized, rendered disposable, or otherwise composed. The initial insight was to reveal how cultural practices produce what is experienced as the "natural," but many theorists also insisted on the *material recalcitrance* of such cultural productions.[1] Though gender, for example, was a congealed bodily effect of historical norms and repetitions, its status as artifact does *not* imply an easy susceptibility to human understanding, reform, or control. The point was that cultural forms are themselves powerful, material assemblages with *resistant force*.

In what follows, I, too, will feature the negative power or recalcitrance of things. But I will also seek to highlight a positive, productive power of their own. And, instead of focusing on collectives conceived primarily

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as conglomerates of *human* designs and practices ("discourse"), I will highlight the active role of *nonhuman* materials in public life. In short, I will try to give voice to a thing-power. As W. J. T. Mitchell notes, "objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template. . . . Things, on the other hand, . . . [signal] the moment when the object becomes the Other, when the sardine can looks back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny and feels the need for what Foucault calls 'a metaphysics of the object, or, more exactly, a metaphysics of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up toward our superficial knowledge.'"[2]

Thing-Power, or the Out-Side

Spinoza ascribes to bodies a peculiar vitality: "Each thing [*res*], as far as it can by its own power, strives [*conatur*] to persevere in its own being."[3] *Conatus* names an "active impulsion" or trending tendency to persist.[4] Although Spinoza distinguishes the human body from other bodies by noting that its "virtue" consists in "nothing other than to live by the guidance of reason,"[5] every nonhuman body shares with every human body a conative nature (and thus a "virtue" appropriate to its material configuration). Conatus names a power present in *every* body: "Any thing whatsoever, whether it be more perfect or less perfect, will always be able to persist in existing with that same force whereby it begins to exist, so that in this respect all things are equal."[6] Even a falling stone, writes Spinoza, "is endeavoring, as far as in it lies, to continue in its motion."[7] As Nancy Levene notes, "Spinoza continually stresses this continuity between human and other beings," for "not only do human beings not form a separate imperium unto themselves; they do not even command the imperium, nature, of which they are a part."[8]

The idea of thing-power bears a family resemblance to Spinoza's conatus, as well as to what Henry David Thoreau called the Wild or that uncanny presence that met him in the Concord woods and atop Mount Ktaadn and also resided in/as that monster called the railroad and that alien called his Genius. Wildness was a not-quite-human force that addled and altered human and other bodies. It named an irreducibly

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strange dimension of matter, an *out-side*. Thing-power is also kin to what Hent de Vries, in the context of political theology, called "the absolute" or that "intangible and imponderable" recalcitrance.[9] Though the absolute is often equated with God, especially in theologies emphasizing divine omnipotence or radical alterity, de Vries defines it more open-endedly as "that which tends to loosen its ties to existing contexts."[10] This definition makes sense when we look at the etymology of *absolute*: *ab* (off) + *solver* (to loosen). The absolute is that which is *loosened off* and on the loose. When, for example, a Catholic priest performs the act of ab-solution, he is the vehicle of a divine agency that loosens sins from their attachment to a particular soul: sins now stand apart, displaced foreigners living a strange, impersonal life of their own. When de Vries speaks of the absolute, he thus tries to point to what no speaker could possibly see, that is, a some-thing that is not an object of knowledge, that is detached or radically free from representation, and thus no-thing at all. Nothing but the force or effectivity of the detachment, that is.

De Vries's notion of the absolute, like the thing-power I will seek to express, seeks to acknowledge that which refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge. But there is also a difference in emphasis. De Vries conceives this exteriority, this out-side, primarily as an epistemological limit: in the presence of the absolute, we cannot *know*. It is from human thinking that the absolute has detached; the absolute names the limits of *intelligibility*. De Vries's formulations thus give priority to humans as knowing bodies, while tending to overlook things and what *they* can do. The notion of thing-power aims instead to attend to the it as actant; I will try, impossibly, to name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there, since things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power. I will shift from the language of epistemology to that of ontology, from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter). I will try to give voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality, in the process absolving matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism.[11]

The strangely vital things that will rise up to meet us in this chapter—a dead rat, a plastic cap, a spool of thread—are characters in a specula-

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tive onto-story. The tale hazards an account of materiality, even though it is both too alien and too close to see clearly and even though linguistic means prove inadequate to the task. The story will highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other. One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world. The hope is that the story will enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us, will generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology.

Thing-Power I: Debris

On a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam's Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore, there was:

one large men's black plastic work glove
one dense mat of oak pollen
one unblemished dead rat
one white plastic bottle cap
one smooth stick of wood

Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing—between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman's efforts, the litterer's toss, the rat-poisoner's success), and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter, but I also felt something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of *that* rat, *that* configuration of pollen, *that* otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water-bottle cap.

I was struck by what Stephen Jay Gould called the "excruciating complexity and intractability" of nonhuman bodies,[12] but, in being *struck*, I

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realized that the capacity of these bodies was not restricted to a passive "intractability" but also included the ability to make things happen, to produce effects. When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me. For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they *were* all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics. In my encounter with the gutter on Cold Spring Lane, I glimpsed a culture of things irreducible to the culture of objects.[13] I achieved, for a moment, what Thoreau had made his life's goal: to be able, as Thomas Dumm puts it, "to be surprised by what we see."[14]

This window onto an eccentric out-side was made possible by the fortuity of that particular assemblage, but also by a certain anticipatory readiness on my in-side, by a perceptual style open to the appearance of thing-power. For I came on the glove-pollen-rat-cap-stick with Thoreau in my head, who had encouraged me to practice "the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen"; with Spinoza's claim that all things are "animate, albeit in different degrees"; and with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* had disclosed for me "an immanent or incipient significance in the living body [which] extends, . . . to the whole sensible world" and which had shown me how "our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other 'objects' the miracle of expression."[15]

As I have already noted, the items on the ground that day were vibratory—at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence: junk, then claimant; inert matter, then live wire. It hit me then in a visceral way how American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is *anti*materiality.[16] The sheer volume of commodities, and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter. In *The Meadowlands*, a late twentieth-century, Thoreauian travelogue of the New Jersey garbage

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hills outside Manhattan, Robert Sullivan describes the vitality that persists even in trash:

> The . . . garbage hills are alive. . . . there are billions of microscopic organisms thriving underground in dark, oxygen-free communities. . . . After having ingested the tiniest portion of leftover New Jersey or New York, these cells then exhale huge underground plumes of carbon dioxide and of warm moist methane, giant stillborn tropical winds that seep through the ground to feed the Meadlowlands' fires, or creep up into the atmosphere, where they eat away at the . . . ozone. . . . One afternoon I . . . walked along the edge of a garbage hill, a forty-foot drumlin of compacted trash that owed its topography to the waste of the city of Newark. . . . There had been rain the night before, so it wasn't long before I found a little leachate seep, a black ooze trickling down the slope of the hill, an espresso of refuse. In a few hours, this stream would find its way down into the . . . groundwater of the Meadowlands; it would mingle with toxic streams. . . . But in this moment, here at its birth, . . . this little seep was pure pollution, a pristine stew of oil and grease, of cyanide and arsenic, of cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, nickel, silver, mercury, and zinc. I touched this fluid—my fingertip was a bluish caramel color—and it was warm and fresh. A few yards away, where the stream collected into a benzene-scented pool, a mallard swam alone.[17]

Sullivan reminds us that a vital materiality can never really be thrown "away," for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity. For Sullivan that day, as for me on that June morning, thing-power rose from a pile of trash. Not Flower Power, or Black Power, or Girl Power, but *Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.

Thing-Power II: Odradek's Nonorganic Life

A dead rat, some oak pollen, and a stick of wood stopped me in my tracks. But so did the plastic glove and the bottle cap: thing-power arises from bodies inorganic as well as organic. In support of this contention, Manuel De Landa notes how even inorganic matter can "self-organize":

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> Inorganic matter-energy has a wider range of alternatives for the generation of structure than just simple phase transitions. . . . In other words, even the humblest forms of matter and energy have the potential for *self-organization* beyond the relatively simple type involved in the creation of crystals. There are, for instance, those coherent waves called solitons which form in many different types of materials, ranging from ocean waters (where they are called tsunamis) to lasers. Then there are . . . stable states (or attractors), which can sustain coherent cyclic activity. . . . Finally, and unlike the previous examples of nonlinear self-organization where true innovation cannot occur, there [are] . . . the different combinations into which entities derived from the previous processes (crystals, coherent pulses, cyclic patterns) may enter. When put together, these forms of spontaneous structural generation suggest that inorganic matter is much more variable and creative than we ever imagined. And this insight into matter's inherent creativity needs to be fully incorporated into our new materialist philosophies.[18]

I will in chapter 4 try to wrestle philosophically with the idea of impersonal or nonorganic life, but here I would like to draw attention to a literary dramatization of this idea: to Odradek, the protagonist of Franz Kafka's short story "Cares of a Family Man." Odradek is a spool of thread who/that can run and laugh; this animate wood exercises an impersonal form of vitality. De Landa speaks of a "spontaneous structural generation" that happens, for example, when chemical systems at far-from-equilibrium states inexplicably choose one path of development rather than another. Like these systems, the material configuration that is Odradek straddles the line between inert matter and vital life.

For this reason Kafka's narrator has trouble assigning Odradek to an ontological category. Is Odradek a cultural artifact, a tool of some sort? Perhaps, but if so, its purpose is obscure: "It looks like a flat star-shaped spool of thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, these are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors. . . . One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; . . . nowhere is there an unfinished or unbroken surface to suggest anything of the kind: the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished."[19]

Or perhaps Odradek is more a subject than an object—an organic

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creature, a little person? But if so, his/her/its embodiment seems rather unnatural: from the center of Odradek's star protrudes a small wooden crossbar, and "by means of this latter rod . . . and one of the points of the star . . . , the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs."[20]

On the one hand, like an active organism, Odradek appears to move deliberately (he is "extraordinarily nimble") and to speak intelligibly: "He lurks by turns in the garret, the stairway, the lobbies, the entrance hall. Often for months on end he is not to be seen; then he has presumably moved into other houses; but he always comes faithfully back to our house again. Many a time when you go out of the door and he happens just to be leaning directly beneath you against the banisters you feel inclined to speak to him. Of course, you put no difficult questions to him, you treat him—he is so diminutive that you cannot help it—rather like a child. 'Well, what's your name?' you ask him. 'Odradek,' he says. 'And where do you live?' 'No fixed abode,' he says and laughs." And yet, on the other hand, like an inanimate object, Odradek produced a so-called laughter that "has no lungs behind it" and "sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves. And that is usually the end of the conversation. Even these answers are not always forthcoming; often he stays mute for a long time, as wooden as his appearance."[21]

Wooden yet lively, verbal yet vegetal, alive yet inert, Odradek is ontologically multiple. He/it is a vital materiality and exhibits what Gilles Deleuze has described as the persistent "hint of the animate in plants, and of the vegetable in animals."[22] The late-nineteenth-century Russian scientist Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky, who also refused any sharp distinction between life and matter, defined organisms as "special, distributed forms of the common mineral, water. . . . Emphasizing the continuity of watery life and rocks, such as that evident in coal or fossil limestone reefs, Vernadsky noted how these apparently inert strata are 'traces of bygone biospheres.'"[23] Odradek exposes this continuity of watery life and rocks; he/it brings to the fore the becoming of things.

Thing-Power III: Legal Actants

I may have met a relative of Odradek while serving on a jury, again in Baltimore, for a man on trial for attempted homicide. It was a small glass vial with an adhesive-covered metal lid: the Gunpowder Residue

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Sampler. This object/witness had been dabbed on the accused's hand hours after the shooting and now offered to the jury its microscopic evidence that the hand had either fired a gun or been within three feet of a gun firing. Expert witnesses showed the sampler to the jury several times, and with each appearance it exercised more force, until it became vital to the verdict. This composite of glass, skin cells, glue, words, laws, metals, and human emotions had become an actant. *Actant*, recall, is Bruno Latour's term for a source of action; an actant can be human or not, or, most likely, a combination of both. Latour defines it as "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general."[24] An actant is neither an object nor a subject but an "intervener,"[25] akin to the Deleuzean "quasi-causal operator."[26] An operator is that which, by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event.

Actant and *operator* are substitute words for what in a more subject-centered vocabulary are called agents. Agentic capacity is now seen as differentially distributed across a wider range of ontological types. This idea is also expressed in the notion of "deodand," a figure of English law from about 1200 until it was abolished in 1846. In cases of accidental death or injury to a human, the nonhuman actant, for example, the carving knife that fell into human flesh or the carriage that trampled the leg of a pedestrian—became deodand (literally, "that which must be given to God"). In recognition of *its* peculiar efficacy (a power that is less masterful than agency but more active than recalcitrance), the deodand, a materiality "suspended between human and thing,"[27] was surrendered to the crown to be used (or sold) to compensate for the harm done. According to William Pietz, "any culture must establish some procedure of compensation, expiation, or punishment to settle the debt created by unintended human deaths whose direct cause is not a morally accountable person, but a nonhuman material object. This was the issue thematized in public discourse by . . . the law of deodand."[28]

There are of course differences between the knife that impales and the man impaled, between the technician who dabs the sampler and the sampler, between the array of items in the gutter of Cold Spring Lane and me, the narrator of their vitality. But I agree with John Frow that these differences need "to be flattened, read horizontally as a juxtapo-

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sition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being. It's a feature of our world that we can and do distinguish . . . things from persons. But the sort of world we live in makes it constantly possible for these two sets of kinds to exchange properties."[29] And to note this fact explicitly, which is also to begin to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility.

Thing-Power IV: Walking, Talking Minerals

Odradek, a gunpowder residue sampler, and some junk on the street can be fascinating to people and can thus seem to come alive. But is this evanescence a property of the stuff or of people? Was the thing-power of the debris I encountered but a function of the subjective and intersubjective connotations, memories, and affects that had accumulated around my ideas of these items? Was the real agent of my temporary immobilization on the street that day *humanity*, that is, the cultural meanings of "rat," "plastic," and "wood" in conjunction with my own idiosyncratic biography? It could be. But what if the swarming activity inside my head was *itself* an instance of the vital materiality that also constituted the trash?

I have been trying to raise the volume on the vitality of materiality per se, pursuing this task so far by focusing on nonhuman bodies, by, that is, depicting them as actants rather than as objects. But the case for matter as active needs also to readjust the status of human actants: not by denying humanity's awesome, awful powers, but by presenting these powers as evidence of our own constitution as vital materiality. In other words, human power is itself a kind of thing-power. At one level this claim is uncontroversial: it is easy to acknowledge that humans are composed of various material parts (the minerality of our bones, or the metal of our blood, or the electricity of our neurons). But it is more challenging to conceive of these materials as lively and self-organizing, rather than as passive or mechanical means under the direction of something nonmaterial, that is, an active soul or mind.

Perhaps the claim to a vitality intrinsic to matter itself becomes more plausible if one takes a long view of time. If one adopts the perspective

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of evolutionary rather than biographical time, for example, a mineral efficacy becomes visible. Here is De Landa's account of the emergence of our bones: "Soft tissue (gels and aerosols, muscle and nerve) reigned supreme until 5000 million years ago. At that point, some of the conglomerations of fleshy matter-energy that made up life underwent a sudden *mineralization*, and a new material for constructing living creatures emerged: bone. It is almost as if the mineral world that had served as a substratum for the emergence of biological creatures was reasserting itself."[30] Mineralization names the creative agency by which bone was produced, and bones then "made new forms of movement control possible among animals, freeing them from many constraints and literally setting them into motion to conquer every available niche in the air, in water, and on land."[31] In the long and slow time of evolution, then, mineral material appears as the mover and shaker, the active power, and the human beings, with their much-lauded capacity for self-directed action, appear as *its* product.[32] Vernadsky seconds this view in his description of humankind as a particularly potent mix of minerals: "What struck [Vernadsky] most was that the material of Earth's crust has been packaged into myriad moving beings whose reproduction and growth build and break down matter on a global scale. People, for example, redistribute and concentrate oxygen . . . and other elements of Earth's crust into two-legged, upright forms that have an amazing propensity to wander across, dig into and in countless other ways alter Earth's surface. *We are walking, talking minerals*."[33]

Kafka, De Landa, and Vernadsky suggest that human individuals are themselves composed of vital materials, that our powers are thing-power. These vital materialists do not claim that there are no differences between humans and bones, only that there is no necessity to describe these differences in a way that places humans at the ontological center or hierarchical apex. Humanity can be distinguished, instead, as Jean-François Lyotard suggests, as a *particularly rich and complex* collection of materials: "Humankind is taken for a complex material system; consciousness, for an effect of language; and language for a highly complex material system."[34] Richard Rorty similarly defines humans as very complex animals, rather than as animals "with an extra added ingredient called 'intellect' or 'the rational soul.'"[35]

The fear is that in failing to affirm human uniqueness, such views

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authorize the treatment of people as mere things; in other words, that a strong distinction between subjects and objects is needed to prevent the instrumentalization of humans. Yes, such critics continue, objects possess a certain power of action (as when bacteria or pharmaceuticals enact hostile or symbiotic projects inside the human body), and yes, some subject-on-subject objectifications are permissible (as when persons consent to use and be used as a means to sexual pleasure), but the *ontological* divide between persons and things must remain lest one have no *moral* grounds for privileging man over germ or for condemning pernicious forms of human-on-human instrumentalization (as when powerful humans exploit illegal, poor, young, or otherwise weaker humans).

How can the vital materialist respond to this important concern? First, by acknowledging that the framework of subject versus object has indeed at times worked to prevent or ameliorate human suffering and to promote human happiness or well-being. Second, by noting that its successes come at the price of an instrumentalization of nonhuman nature that can itself be unethical and can itself undermine long-term human interests. Third, by pointing out that the Kantian imperative to treat humanity always as an end-in-itself and never merely as a means does not have a stellar record of success in preventing human suffering or promoting human well-being: it is important to raise the question of its actual, historical efficacy in order to open up space for forms of ethical practice that do not rely upon the image of an intrinsically *hierarchical* order of things. Here the materialist speaks of promoting healthy and enabling instrumentalizations, rather than of treating people as ends-in-themselves, because to face up to the compound nature of the human self is to find it difficult even to make sense of the notion of a single end-in-itself. What instead appears is a swarm of competing ends being pursued simultaneously in each individual, some of which are healthy to the whole, some of which are not. Here the vital materialist, taking a cue from Nietzsche's and Spinoza's ethics, favors physiological over moral descriptors because she fears that moralism can itself become a source of unnecessary human suffering.[36]

We are now in a better position to name that other way to promote human health and happiness: *to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed*. Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonder-

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fully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter. If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief. Vital materialism would thus set up a kind of safety net for those humans who are now, in a world where Kantian morality is the standard, routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular (Euro-American, bourgeois, theocentric, or other) model of personhood. The ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such. Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself. Such an enlightened or expanded notion of self-interest *is good for humans*. As I will argue further in chapter 8, a vital materialism does not reject self-interest as a motivation for ethical behavior, though it does seek to cultivate a broader definition of self and of interest.

Thing-Power V: Thing-Power and Adorno's Nonidentity

But perhaps the very idea of thing-power or vibrant matter claims too much: to know more than it is possible to know. Or, to put the criticism in Theodor Adorno's terms, does it exemplify the violent hubris of Western philosophy, a tradition that has consistently failed to mind the gap between concept and reality, object and thing? For Adorno this gap is ineradicable, and the most that can be said with confidence about the thing is that it eludes capture by the concept, that there is always a "nonidentity" between it and any representation. And yet, as I shall argue, even Adorno continues to seek a way to access—however darkly, crudely, or fleetingly—this out-side. One can detect a trace of this longing in the following quotation from *Negative Dialectics*: "What we may call the thing itself is not positively and immediately at hand. He who wants to know it must think more, not less."[37] Adorno clearly rejects the possibility of any direct, sensuous apprehension ("the thing itself is not

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positively and immediately at hand"), but he does not reject all modes of encounter, for there is one mode, "thinking more, not less," that holds promise. In this section I will explore some of the affinities between Adorno's nonidentity and my thing-power and, more generally, between his "specific materialism" (*ND*, 203) and a vital materialism.

Nonidentity is the name Adorno gives to that which is not subject to knowledge but is instead "heterogeneous" to all concepts. This elusive force is not, however, wholly outside human experience, for Adorno describes nonidentity as a presence that acts upon us: we knowers are haunted, he says, by a painful, nagging feeling that something's being forgotten or left out. This discomfiting sense of the inadequacy of representation remains no matter how refined or analytically precise one's concepts become. "Negative dialectics" is the method Adorno designs to teach us how to *accentuate* this discomforting experience and how to give it a meaning. When practiced correctly, negative dialectics will render the static buzz of nonidentity into a powerful reminder that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder" and thus that life will always exceed our knowledge and control. The ethical project par excellence, as Adorno sees it, is to keep remembering this and to learn how to accept it. Only then can we stop raging against a world that refuses to offer us the "reconcilement" that we, according to Adorno, crave (*ND*, 5).[38]

For the vital materialist, however, the starting point of ethics is less the acceptance of the impossibility of "reconcilement" and more the recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality. We *are* vital materiality and we are surrounded by it, though we do not always see it that way. The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it. In a parallel manner, Adorno's "specific materialism" also recommends a set of practical techniques for training oneself to better detect and accept nonidentity. Negative dialectics is, in other words, the pedagogy inside Adorno's materialism.

This pedagogy includes intellectual as well as aesthetic exercises. The intellectual practice consists in the attempt to make the very process of conceptualization an explicit object of thought. The goal here is to become more cognizant that conceptualization automatically obscures the inadequacy of its concepts. Adorno believes that critical reflection

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can expose this cloaking mechanism and that the exposure will intensify the felt presence of nonidentity. The treatment is homeopathic: we must develop a *concept* of nonidentity to cure the hubris of conceptualization. The treatment can work because, however distorting, concepts still "refer to nonconceptualities." This is "because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation" (*ND*, 12). Concepts can never provide a clear view of things in themselves, but the "discriminating man," who "in the matter and its concept can distinguish even the infinitesimal, that which escapes the concept" (*ND*, 45), can do a better job of gesturing toward them. Note that the discriminating man (adept at negative dialectics) both subjects his conceptualizations to second-order reflection and pays close *aesthetic* attention to the object's "qualitative moments" (*ND*, 43), for these open a window onto nonidentity.

A second technique of the pedagogy is to exercise one's utopian imagination. The negative dialectician should imaginatively re-create what has been obscured by the distortion of conceptualization: "The means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility—the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one" (*ND*, 52). Nonidentity resides in those denied possibilities, in the invisible field that surrounds and infuses the world of objects.

A third technique is to admit a "playful element" into one's thinking and to be willing to play the fool. The negative dialectician "knows how far he remains from" knowing nonidentity, "and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning. He must not deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give him hope for what is denied him" (*ND*, 14).

The self-criticism of conceptualization, a sensory attentiveness to the qualitative singularities of the object, the exercise of an unrealistic imagination, and the courage of a clown: by means of such practices one might replace the "rage" against nonidentity with a respect for it, a respect that chastens our will to mastery. That rage is for Adorno the driving force behind interhuman acts of cruelty and violence. Adorno goes even further to suggest that negative dialectics can transmute the anguish of nonidentity into a will to ameliorative political action: the thing thwarts our desire for conceptual and practical mastery and this

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refusal angers us; but it also offers us an ethical injunction, according to which "suffering ought not to be, . . . things should be different. Woe speaks: 'Go.' Hence the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice" (*ND*, 202–3).[39]

Adorno founds his ethics on an intellectual and aesthetic attentiveness that, though it will always fail to see its object clearly, nevertheless has salutory effects on the bodies straining to see. Adorno willingly plays the fool by questing after what I would call thing-power, but which he calls "the preponderance of the object" (*ND*, 183). Humans encounter a world in which nonhuman materialities have power, a power that the "bourgeois I," with its pretensions to autonomy, denies.[40] It is at this point that Adorno identifies negative dialectics as a materialism: it is only "by passing to the object's preponderance that dialectics is rendered materialistic" (*ND*, 192).

Adorno dares to affirm something like thing-power, but he does not want to play the fool for *too* long. He is quick—too quick from the point of view of the vital materialist—to remind the reader that objects are always "entwined" with human subjectivity and that he has no desire "to place the object on the orphaned royal throne once occupied by the subject. On that throne the object would be nothing but an idol" (*ND*, 181). Adorno is reluctant to say too much about nonhuman vitality, for the more said, the more it recedes from view. Nevertheless, Adorno does try to attend somehow to this reclusive reality, by means of a negative dialectics. Negative dialectics has an affinity with negative theology: negative dialectics honors nonidentity as one would honor an unknowable god; Adorno's "specific materialism" includes the possibility that there is divinity behind or within the reality that withdraws. Adorno rejects any naive picture of transcendence, such as that of a loving God who designed the world ("metaphysics cannot rise again" [*ND*, 404] after Auschwitz), but the desire for transcendence cannot, he believes, be eliminated: "Nothing could be experienced as truly alive if something that transcends life were not promised also. . . . The transcendent is, and it is not" (*ND*, 375).[41] Adorno honors nonidentity as an *absent* absolute, as a messianic promise.[42]

Adorno struggles to describe a force that is *material* in its resistance to human concepts but *spiritual* insofar as it might be a dark promise of an absolute-to-come. A vital materialism is more thoroughly nontheistic in

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presentation: the out-side has no messianic promise.[43] But a philosophy of nonidentity and a vital materialism nevertheless share an urge to cultivate a more careful attentiveness to the out-side.

The Naive Ambition of Vital Materialism

Adorno reminds us that humans can experience the out-side only indirectly, only through vague, aporetic, or unstable images and impressions. But when he says that even distorting concepts still "refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation" (*ND*, 12), Adorno also acknowledges that human experience nevertheless includes encounters with an out-side that is active, forceful, and (quasi)independent. This out-side can operate at a distance from our bodies or it can operate as a foreign power internal to them, as when we feel the discomfort of nonidentity, hear the naysaying voice of Socrates's demon, or are moved by what Lucretius described as that "something in our breast" capable of fighting and resisting.[44] There is a strong tendency among modern, secular, well-educated humans to refer such signs back to a human agency conceived as its ultimate source. This impulse toward cultural, linguistic, or historical constructivism, which interprets any expression of thing-power as an effect of culture and the play of human powers, politicizes moralistic and oppressive appeals to "nature." And that is a good thing. But the constructivist response to the world also tends to obscure from view whatever thing-power there may be. There is thus something to be said for moments of methodological naiveté, for the postponement of a genealogical critique of objects.[45] This delay might render manifest a subsistent world of nonhuman vitality. To "render manifest" is both to receive and to participate in the shape given to that which is received. What is manifest arrives through humans but not entirely because of them.

Vital materialists will thus try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them. This sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and

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commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically. But how to develop this capacity for naiveté? One tactic might be to revisit and become temporarily infected by discredited philosophies of nature, risking "the taint of superstition, animism, vitalism, anthropomorphism, and other premodern attitudes."[46] I will venture into vitalism in chapters 5 and 6, but let me here make a brief stop at the ancient atomism of Lucretius, the Roman devotee of Epicurus.

Lucretius tells of bodies falling in a void, bodies that are not lifeless stuff but matter on the go, entering and leaving assemblages, swerving into each other: "*At times quite undetermined and at undetermined spots they push a little from their path*: yet only just so much as you could call a change of trend. [For if they did not] . . . swerve, all things would fall downwards through the deep void like drops of rain, nor could collision come to be, nor a blow brought to pass for the primordia: so nature would never have brought anything into existence."[47] Louis Althusser described this as a "materialism of the encounter," according to which political events are born from chance meetings of atoms.[48] A primordial swerve says that the world is not determined, that an element of chanciness resides at the heart of things, but it also affirms that so-called inanimate things have a life, that deep within is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies: a kind of thing-power.

The rhetoric of *De Rerum Natura* is realist, speaking in an authoritative voice, claiming to describe a nature that preexists and outlives us: here are the smallest constituent parts of being ("primordia") and here are the principles of association governing them.[49] It is easy to criticize this realism: Lucretius quests for the thing itself, but there is no there there—or, at least, no way for us to grasp or know it, for the thing is always already humanized; its object status arises at the very instant something comes into our awareness. Adorno levels this charge explicitly against Martin Heidegger's phenomenology, which Adorno interprets as a "realism" that "seeks to breach the walls which thought has built around itself, to pierce the interjected layer of subjective positions that have become a second nature." Heidegger's aim "to philosophize formlessly, so to speak, purely on the ground of things" (*ND*, 78)[50] is for Adorno futile, and it is productive of a violent "rage" against nonidentity.[51]

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But Lucretius's poem—like Kafka's stories, Sullivan's travelogue, Vernadsky's speculations, and my account of the gutter of Cold Spring Lane—does offer this potential benefit: it can direct sensory, linguistic, and imaginative attention toward a material vitality. The advantage of such tales, with their ambitious naiveté, is that though they "disavow . . . the tropological work, the psychological work, and the phenomenological work entailed in the human production of materiality," they do so "in the name of *avowing* the force of questions that have been too readily foreclosed by more familiar fetishizations: the fetishization of the subject, the image, the word."[52]

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